

14th Annual Parrot Count- Report on the 2011 Cape Parrot Big Birding Day.

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This year's Cape Parrot Big Birding Day (CPBBD) is dedicated to the late Barry Porter, an exceptional naturalist and a stalwart participant in the CPBBD, never missing one until his untimely death a week before this year's count. He co-ordinated counts for the past 14 years near Ingeli. He will be sorely missed in this role and in many other ways.

In Africa there are about ten medium-sized parrot species comprising the genus *Poicephalus*. They are distributed over much of sub-Saharan Africa. *Poicephalus* means literally "made of head", and as the name suggests, these species have large heads and bills. The Cape Parrot, *Poicephalus robustus*, with its olive-golden head is the only species endemic to South Africa. The Grey-headed Parrot is now considered a separate species and its distribution extends northwards. Although the Cape Parrot previously had a more extensive range in South Africa it is now mainly restricted to patches in the mosaic of afro-montane southern mistbelt forests from Hogsback in the Eastern Cape through to the Balcrow and Karkloof areas of KwaZulu-Natal with a disjunct population in the Magoeboskloof region of Limpopo Province.

Cape Parrots are food nomads, as they move between forest patches as the availability of fruiting trees is patchy. Their preferred foods are the kernels of yellowwood (*Podocarpus* sp.) fruits. However these are usually only available from June through to November. Yellowwood trees show mast fruiting, which is the intermittent but synchronous production of large numbers of fruits by a population of trees. These fruiting events may be separated by long intervals. Consequently the parrots cannot rely on a particular patch of yellowwoods fruiting annually. During the remainder of the year Cape Parrots feed on other forest fruits with kernels, including *Harpephyllum caffrum* and *Celtis africana*. They also feed on *Protea* seeds in patches adjacent to forest. When fruit is scarce in the summer they make long feeding trips to coastal forests and/or visit food sources outside of forests, including commercial orchards and gardens. In years following extreme heat or drought it appears that the parrots more often find food outside of forests. Interestingly a flock

of about 30 Cape Parrots visited Adelaide this year for the first time in many years and in the Karkloof parrots have been seen at localities outside of the forest where they have not been previously. So the parrots have had to search for alternative food sources at certain times this year.

Cape Parrots are generally loud and conspicuous when active. They are most active the first few hours after dawn and for a few hours before sunset. Although on misty days this activity may extend longer. They have variable flock sizes. Sometimes parrots are seen flying as singletons, in pairs or in family groups of about five or sometimes as larger flocks. At feeding sites they may congregate with 20-100 parrots sometimes seen together giving the false impression that they are abundant. Cape Parrots are unable to excavate their own nests and so are termed secondary cavity nesters. Their nests are most often in tall, dead yellowwoods referred to as “snags”. Cape Parrots usually reach breeding age at 4-5 years old.

Cape Parrot numbers have declined since the 1940s and 1950s. There are several reasons suggested for this, including loss or change in quality of their preferred forest habitat, that in turn result in food and nest-site shortages. Other reasons include illegal poaching of wild birds for the caged bird trade, disease, (especially Psittascene Beak and Feather Virus (PBFDV)), and avian predators. These factors vary in their effects across the parrots’ range.

Standard bird counting techniques are not suitable for Cape Parrots. As mentioned they are nomadic feeders and their behaviour is unpredictable. The parrots are difficult to locate once perched in the forest but their loud harsh call whilst in-flight makes them unmistakable. These characteristics allow for a “total count” of the number of parrots left in the wild. The first national census was initiated 14 years ago, known as the Cape Parrot Big Birding Day (CPBBD) and has been held annually ever since. This census involves mainly volunteers from a range of backgrounds and walks of life who annually band together to help us estimate how many Cape Parrots are left in the wild. The census is a difficult task as it requires knowledge of the often-remote forest habitats and suitable observation posts, knowledge of parrot movements and the availability of enough volunteers to cover the areas where parrots occur. Other considerations are whether all areas are covered, whether volunteers are knowledgeable and have good vantage points, whether parrots are not counted more than once when moving between locations, and the weather. Sadly this year the weather did not co-operate in many regions with cold, and rain, and visibility almost nil in some areas. Consequently the numbers counted may be an under-estimate.

As the Cape Parrot is rare, there is a fear that a conservation effort like this may be exposing the location of the birds to those who are intent on catching them.

This is a paradox. We feel that the need to know whether the population is in decline or is increasing is fundamental information for the conservation effort. Furthermore, the increased public awareness brings about an unofficial monitoring system of the species in addition to the formal conservation effort through the Cape Parrot Working Group.

In recent years fewer than 1600 parrots have been counted in the wild (Fig. 1). Although the primary aim of the CPBBD is to estimate population numbers of Cape Parrots in the wild, there are a number of other benefits. Movements and seasonal changes in the feeding patterns of the parrots are evident. Of concern are those forests where illegal logging and or hunting of wildlife occurs. The annual CPBBD also highlights the importance of our South African Afromontane/-temperate indigenous forest patches. In particular, other endangered forest species or those found in the neighbouring grasslands, including Samango Monkeys (*Cercopithecus mitis*) and Southern Ground Hornbills (*Bucorvus leadbeateri*) are recorded too. This year these species as well as oribi, African wild cat, several crane and vulture species were observed.

Results for 2011

The areas of South Africa covered by the count included the Eastern Cape, KZN and Limpopo Provinces. This year at least 212 volunteers were posted at 66 observation points in the three provinces. This was fewer than in previous years. At least 1020 parrots were seen during the afternoon count while 1176 were seen the following morning, despite the weather being poor in many areas, making visibility difficult. As a consequence this should not be regarded as a total count as it is likely an underestimate. The maximum number of Cape Parrots seen in each of the areas covered suggests that there were at least 1187 in the wild on the CPBBD in 2011. More parrots were seen in the Stutterheim area than in the Hogsback-Keiskammahoek area. There was good coverage of the inland forests between Umtata and Kokstad, as well as the Dargle to Fort Nottingham. Observers saw parrots at 57% and 64% of the localities on the Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning respectively. Again the importance of nil counts is emphasised as this indicates that the parrots were not at that locality that day.

As in past years, there were several communities involved in this year's CPBBD. This highlights the importance of the CPBBD day in developing interest, knowledge and hopefully conservation awareness. The observers in the Langeni / Matiwane Region area had a get together and produced a very detailed report for their area (Patrick Mavaleliso, Bertus Bouwer and Angie Cameron, Indwe Security

field rangers and Starlight Security are thanked).

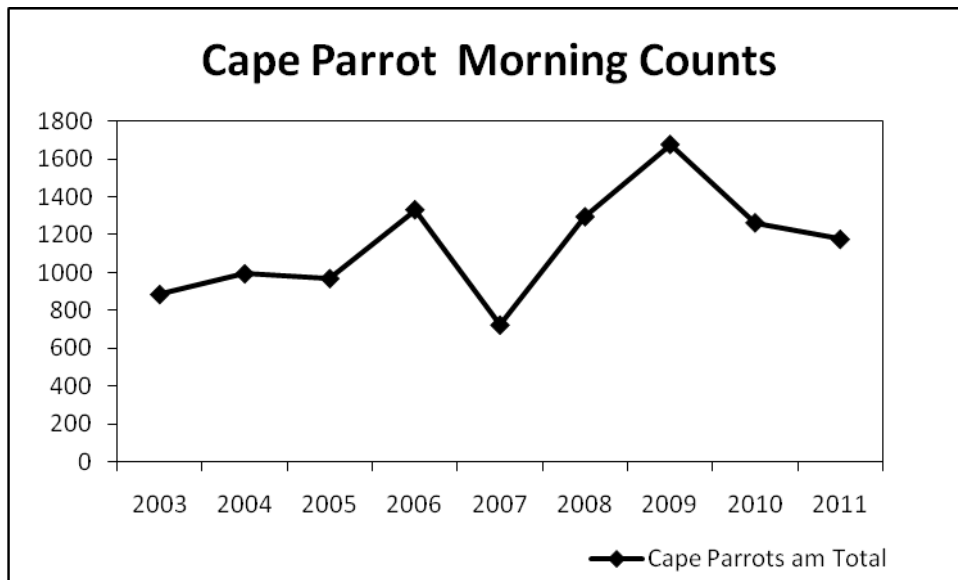


Fig. 1. Total number of Cape Parrots counted for the period 2003-2011 on the CPBBD.

Conclusion

It is hoped that awareness has been raised about the Cape Parrot's plight and its dependence on indigenous forest. The CPBBD is one of the important ways of involving the public in monitoring this special species whose forest habitat is also of conservation concern.

Acknowledgements

We are most grateful to all those who participated in the CPBBD, particularly the co-ordinators (Appendix 1) and those volunteers who have participated for a number of years. We continue to be extremely grateful for the effort, enthusiasm and continued support of the co-ordinators. We are also grateful for the contribution of DAFF, DEAT, Rance Timbers, Sappi and Mondi foresters, Indwe Security, and E. Cape Parks and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife officials (particularly those from Coleford Nature Reserve).

DVDS of Don Guy's 50/50 Cape Parrot documentary in 2000 detailing factors affecting their decline are available from Prof CT Downs for R50.00. Funds go to the ongoing Cape Parrot research at UKZN. Please contact her +27-332605127 or email downs@ukzn.ac.za

Cape Parrot Day 2012- please diarise 5 and 6th May 2012

Appendix 1. Thanks is extended to the co-ordinators of the Cape Parrot Big Birding Day 2011.

Area	Name	Tel	Email
Overall co-ordinator	Colleen Downs	033 260 5127; 0829202026	downs@ukzn.ac.za
Karkloof	Rob Rawson	033 5029059; 0794858200	mbona@iafrica.com
	John and Jenny Robinson	033-5029090/ 082-4433805	tomrob@mweb.co.za
Dargle/ Nottingham Rd/ Balgowan	Nikki Brighton	033 234 4289 083 473 3074	cowfriend@telkomsa.net
Byrne Valley	Malcolm Anderson	033 2122744 082 5723455	mmanderson@mweb.co.za
Boston	Barbara & Glyn Bullock	033 997 1783	grbullock@telkomsa.net
Bulwer	Russell Hill	039 8320053 082 9239649	carolhill@futurenet.co.za
Creighton/Donnybrook	Malcolm Gemmell	039 8331029 082 7895000	buttonbirding@futurenet.co.za
Ngeli	Colleen Downs	See above	
Mpur/Glengarry	Barry Porter	039-6846685, 083-5359304	hella@mweb.co.za
	Andy Ruffle	039 695 0829; 0728933794	andy_ruffle@yahoo.co.uk
Alfred Nzo Region, namely: Ntsiswa, Gomo, Bulembu, Tonti, Amanzinyama and Xhama Forest	Dean Ricketts	0824325104	Dean.Rickets@deaet.ecape.gov.za
Mthatha Langeni / Matiwane Ngcobo	Patrick	072 108 4568; 047-541 0105 (w)	vanessa@starsec.net
	Mavaleliso	083 452 0883; 043-740 2993 (w)	gary@starsec.net /
	Gary Harvey	082 856 3982; 043-726 0513 (w)	starsec@mweb.co.za
	Bertus Bouwer		bertus@starsec.net
Hogsback	Graham Russell	045 9621084 0823746583	gandm@procomp.co.za
Stutterheim	Neill Harvey	043-6832384	alliedin@eci.co.za
Wild Coast (Port St Johns)	Kathryn Costello	047 5641240	outspan@wildcoast.co.za
Mbotyi	Nita Ross	039-2537200/01	info@mbotyi.co.za
KWT/Alice	Gertie Griffith	043 7352195	gerken@intekom.com
	Peter Mather-Pike	043 7403566 0829248514	pamp@supafeeds.co.za
Limpopo Province	Nikki McCartney	0836361060	mbr@birdlife.org.za
	David Letsoalo	0835684678	info@krm.co.za

CAPE PARROT (*Poicephalus robustus*) facts.

- Found only in South Africa. Regarded as Endangered.
- Virtually the whole lifestyle of these birds is centred on yellowwood trees. Their preferred feeding, roosting and nesting sites are in forests dominated by these trees.
- In South Africa suitable forest patches are found in the Eastern Cape and southern KwaZulu-Natal with a few scattered yellowwood forest patches in Limpopo.
- Must not be confused with the Grey-headed Parrot, (*Poicephalus fuscicollis suahelicus*) which looks very similar to the Cape Parrot, but is found in the Limpopo Province, Mocambique and Zimbabwe and is now regarded as a separate species from the Cape Parrot.
- A mature Cape Parrot stands 30cm high and can weigh up to 350g. Like all parrots it has a robust beak which is used to crack open nuts and seeds. The favoured seed is that of the yellowwood tree and their availability greatly influences seasonal movements of these birds. They also feed on other forest trees especially the Natal plum and White stinkwood. If the indigenous food source is in short supply, the parrots are sometimes forced to feed outside forests and will raid fruit orchards or pecan nut trees.
- Nest in cavities usually in dead yellowwood trees. They usually lay three eggs of which one to two chicks survive the first year.
- Use mature yellowwood trees, which usually project out of the forest canopy, as roosting sites and vantage points. They are active and inquisitive birds which are often seen flying around and above forest patches in the early morning or late afternoon.
- Characteristic loud squawk is usually heard when the birds are in flight and contact calls between roosting birds may also be heard.